

Spectacular meteor over the Northern Province

Magda Streicher

A very bright meteoric event took place over the northern parts of South Africa and southern Botswana/Zimbabwe on Saturday, 21 November 2009 at around 23h00. It was widely seen, as far north as Gweru, Zimbabwe, Durban in the south and Boshof in the west. A few surveillance cameras recorded footage of the actual meteor while others showed their night scene turn into “day” and shadows tracking the movement of the source. All over the internet blogs exploded with reports and most news media covered accounts of sightings. In many cases people were woken up by the blinding light and in some instances, by the sound. One such person, who was lucky enough (or is it not!) to have been close enough to the action, was our own Magda Streicher. She wrote:

“We spent the weekend of 21 November 2009 with friends on our farm which is 20 km north of the small town of Alldays (see map). Located at 22°30S, 29°07E, the farm is barely 30 km from the Pont Drift border post which guards the border between South Africa and Botswana. The Beitbridge control post to Zimbabwe is ~90 km to the east.

“It was partly cloudy and we spent most of the evening indoors. We decided to turn in shortly before 23h00. I hardly

got to the bedroom when I suddenly saw a bright glow through the curtains of the Bushveld outside lighting up, as if with a huge flashlight. The next moment a loud double impact sound, like a bomb blast, hit us – it sounded as if something massive struck the ground. This was followed by an after-sound in the form of a rumble, lasting about three seconds, causing the windows to rattle. Then suddenly ... dead silence. I immediately knew it had to be a meteor and wondered if it impacted or exploded in the air.

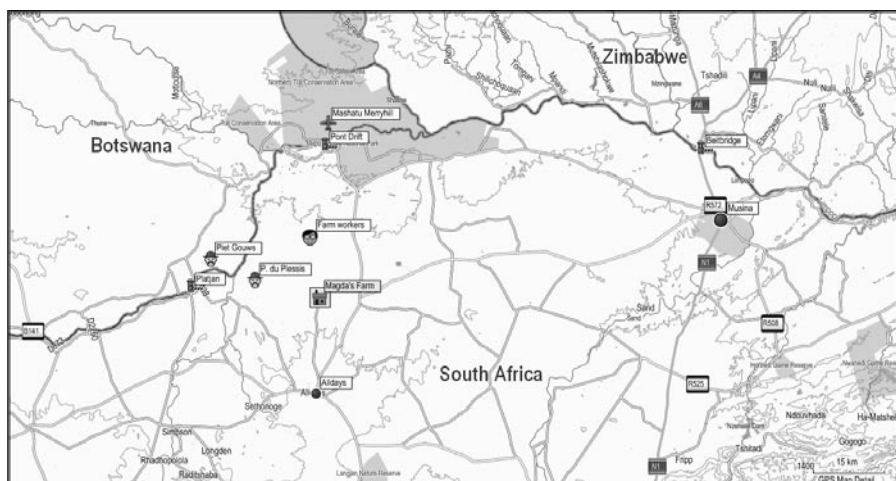
“Someone in the room next door happened to be looking out the window when it struck. She regarded it to be the brightest light she ever saw. It lit up the velt as far as the eye could see – bright enough to read a book. She estimated the time to be 23h00.

“Early the next morning (Sunday, 22 November) I started calling various people around the area. The first person I spoke to was Johan Willemsse who stays near the Platjan border post, some 30 km west of us. He reported that the blinding meteor turned into a fiery red-purple fireball. At this stage a loud sizzling sound was heard, burning smoke was seen with the earth rumbling and windows shaking madly. Others, all in a radius of 20 km around us, reported the following: Philip

du Plessis thought his house has been blasted away. Pieter Lombard saw the meteor as a glowing, burning ball of fire. A double flash was seen by Piet Barkhuizen and at the house of Derick-Piet Gouws a wall cracked and it sounded as if the door was moving in its frame. He also heard the hissing sound, saw smoke and a very red western horizon. Due to good rains no fires were reported in the area around us, which could have helped to indicate an impact area. I also spoke to farm workers further north of us who said that the meteor went nearly overhead, in the direction of Pont Drift. Seismic calculations attempted by Pete le Roux from the Mashatu Merryhill airfield, put the blast epicentre at an area about 5 km east of Pont Drift. However, this is mere speculation.

“The furthest away that the sound was heard (that I know of) was a farm close to Soutpansberg (~80 km south of us) and around 50 km inside Botswana, about 100 km west of us.”

At the moment, Tim Cooper, ASSA’s Comet and Meteor Director, is still busy analysing the mass of eyewitness reports while Claire Flanagan of the Johannesburg Planetarium is attempting to extract trails and positional information from the surveillance camera footage. A Geophysicist, Roger Gibson, has been looking for the end-point (in case any debris fell) and Water Resource Engineer and a Meteorite Collector, Ronnie McKenzie, has been searching on the ground. We are looking forward to a full article on their findings in a future issue of *MNASSA*. ☆



A map, generated using Garmin’s *MapSource* GPS software, indicating some of the localities discussed in the text. The map extents are 90 x 200 km.